

Dog Eat Dog: Neo-imperialism in Kim Ki-duk's *Address Unknown*

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Kim Ki-duk's 2001 film *Address Unknown* presents a political allegory of modern Korea by referencing past traumas through local characters set in a U.S. military base town in 1970. The physical and emotional scars of past violence reveal current victimization re-enacting social injustice. Cold War militarism and the U.S. presence shatter the lives of three young people and the community as they internalize the destruction of their lives.

KOREA AND THE AMERICANS

The director Kim Ki-duk's feature film *Address Unknown* (*Suchwiin bulmyeong* [2001]) presents an unrelieved critique of South Korea's neocolonial status by analyzing it in terms of a set of characters whose lives are framed within the economic, political, social and linguistic arrangements dominated by the United States and most specifically by the U.S. military presence. I find the film a compelling example of contemporary cinema engaging with the social and psychological effects of contemporary global capitalism. At the same time the film, as with a number of Kim's other films, raises distinct questions about how to present such a critique. Therefore this essay will try to open the film to a discussion of representation, context, politics and aesthetics as problems to be considered as integral to the film, rather than try to assert that the film is a "masterpiece" of political cinematic art.

I am not an expert on Korea or Korean cinema; so my analysis has to be limited in some ways, but I can draw on two excellent discussions of the film by Myung Ja Kim [2007] and Steve Choe [2007] and a slowly growing critical discussion of the director's body of work.¹ Also inevitably my reading of the film takes place within an international frame, seeing it as a film that enters world cinema culture, although it speaks most directly of and to Korea. This fact is part of a sharply ironic contradiction in *Address Unknown* and Kim's other work. His earlier work has been better critically received abroad by film festivals and writers (and in some cases in production funding) than it was commercially or critically in South

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Korea. In addition to negative commercial and critical regard at home and film reviewers' criticism of his "excessive" violence, many of his films have been criticized as misogynist by Korean feminists.² I will address this issue in some detail later in this essay. Here let me just offer as a placeholder that the mere act of my choosing a film and writing about it grants it a certain position or validity, even when it is then given a negative evaluation. To ignore something means it is not worthy of any attention; to denounce or criticize is to invest time and value in the effort and by extension its object. Here I want to analyze the film as a case study, which raises larger questions about films that both criticize and in some ways remain within the dominant ideology, and how we can understand them politically.

In that frame, we need to understand some essentials about modern Korean society. The Republic of Korea (ROK) was shaped in its first 40 years (1948–88) after Japanese colonialism by four very public characteristics [Armstrong 2008]. First, an especially strong Cold War anti-communism that not only rallied the citizens to the state but which also repressed any considerations of class, class distinction, and class discrimination. Second, a military authoritarianism in the form of successive dictatorships, which was secured by compulsory service for all males. Third, a state and business corporatism, in which the state took on the task of accumulating capital and managing labor to build initially export-based light industries (such as textiles) which exploited cheap and unskilled labor and which later shifted, to the Korean *chaebol* (conglomerate) which expanded into technical industries (pharmaceuticals, electronics, automobiles, etc.) and heavy industry (steel, shipbuilding, etc.). Finally, there was an official pro-Americanism in which Korea stood as an ally, notably during the Vietnam War, with a concomitant resentment of the U.S. presence at the lower levels of society and direct ongoing tension in the military towns.

With the end of what Americans call the Asian economic bubble of the 1990s and what Koreans call the IMF Crisis of 1997, the ROK had to submit to International Monetary Fund dictates, including labor deregulation, fiscal austerity, increased foreign investment including the opening of financial markets and removal of tariffs, and restrictions on imports (especially from the United States), and accountable auditing of the *chaebols*. Neoliberal changes concentrated on reducing the *chaebols'* practices of providing social benefits (job security, health, insurance, retirement, etc.). The workforce changed to now being 60 percent contingent labor. While it is set in 1970 Kim Ki-duk's film speaks to a new era in which past patterns have continued and new dislocations introduced.

IT'S A DOG'S LIFE

Kim's clear intention for *Address Unknown* was to make a social and political commentary for South Korean audiences, since it touches on issues that remain sensitive and painful: class, race and gender discrimination, the U.S. military presence and the peninsula framed as a Cold War battleground. The film was a notable box office failure in South Korea (a little over 10,000 tickets sold in Seoul), which can be explained by its relentless pessimism in depicting the

limited opportunities for poor rural youth, and its raising of uncomfortable questions about local complicity in neo-imperialism. In raising a political and economic analysis, I follow David Harvey's enlightening discussion in *The New Imperialism* [Harvey 2005]. I need to clarify that this film must be read in a double register. The depicted events are set at a key moment, 1970, and thus part of the interpretation must refer to historical events of the Korean state and capitalism, while the film appears in 2001 at the dawn of a new century with a new configuration of government and Korean and global capitalism.

The film's allegorical core involves the depiction of finding dogs, killing them by hanging and beating them, and then selling the carcass meat to a local restaurant that serves dog dishes. This theater of animal cruelty is presented with a thinly veiled reference to the central characters as themselves being victims. The two dog-catchers are caught in a world with a continuous U.S. military presence, signaled by soldiers as onscreen characters and by military aircraft on the soundtrack or in the distance when the foreign presence is not directly on-screen. As an example of an emergent Korean cinematic expression of serious issues in the public sphere, *Address Unknown* marks the problem of moving both beyond a decades-long tradition of strict film censorship under a military state, and a long-standing Korean expectation of cinema as an entertainment, an amusement, while facing up to the new complications of the global cinema market in neo-liberal times. I argue that the film can and should be read in terms of the social effects of neo-imperialism in the Korean context. It raises acute issues of the persistent military presence of the United States on the southern peninsula, the class stratification of Korean society, and the situation of women and racially mixed children, by dramatically foregrounding themes of violent domination.

It is often remarked that the director, usually working outside the dominant Korean film industry, shoots very fast and economically using lesser known or newcomer actors. The downside of this approach produces some awkward acting and continuity lapses.³ Less often noticed is the scripting of a high rate of incident and short scenes, which also involve here quickly moving among different members of the community. While we might want to describe Kim's early works as social realist or neorealist, the pace throws attention on the story and the cinematic expression rather than on character development and character psychology. We might remember André Bazin's validation of *Bicycle Thieves* [*I Ladri di biciclette*, Vittorio De Sica 1948] as a drama of moral decision firmly grounded in a geographically and visually realized location (which is enhanced by long takes that allow us especially to see the characters in relation to their surroundings) [Bazin 1971]. In contrast, *Address Unknown* quickly introduces a number of key characters and usually shows them in action rather than in dialogue. Their physical surroundings are expressively related to the characters' psychological states but the camera moves on, returning to the site at a different moment for a different dramatic development. Expressive long shots place the characters within an isolating physical landscape, though the director uses acute close-ups for powerful articulation: a key scene is well detailed by Choe [2007: 69–75]. The film portrays social and ethical issues in terms of behaviors rather than characters articulating ideas.

The film begins with an explanatory past event, as a crude zip gun is manufactured from a U.S. military crate and the resulting weapon is used in a kid's game of William Tell that goes terribly wrong, blinding the victim in one eye.⁴ Set in 1970, the film quickly presents a U.S. military base in a rural area and several young people. A main character, Chang-guk (Yang Dong-kun), assists the local dog-butcher in rounding up animals. He is the son of a Korean woman and an African-American GI who has long ago left Korea. He's also a dropout who faces discrimination and insults for his mixed race and cross-national origins. He befriends Ji-hum (Kim Young-min), a teenaged boy who works as an assistant in a portrait painter's studio and who is regularly bullied by two young guys who physically and verbally abuse the apprentice and take his money. Ji-hum is attracted to a lonely schoolgirl, Eun-ok (Ban Min-Jung) whose widowed mother gets by on her husband's veteran pension (he presumably died in combat during the Korean War) and by assembling teddy bear toys at home. Eun-ok is blind in one eye from her brother's gunplay, and her only delight is a puppy whom she plays with and has taught to lick her genitals.

Dog-eye (Jo Jae-hyeon) is the local dog-butcher who rounds up animals on his motorcycle with a cage on the back, kills them by hanging them and then beats them with a baseball bat, cuts up the carcasses and sells them to the local restaurant for dog stew [Figure 1].⁵ He is a violent and abusive war veteran who had a relation with Chang-guk's mother (Bang Eun-im) before she was with the GI, and has been her boyfriend since. We infer that he took on her son as his apprentice out of this relationship. The mother lives with her son in an abandoned military bus away from town, and we see her gleaning the surrounding rice fields and getting into an abusive fight with a small grocery store owner (she insists on speaking English and the proprietor refuses her service), and is caught stealing cabbages from a greenhouse. Her son intervenes and physically



Figure 1 Dog-eye delivers butchered dog meat to a local restaurant.

carries her away. Alone, she writes letters to her U.S. GI which are always returned “address unknown.”

The film reveals a continuous cycle of violence, humiliation, and abuse at every level and for every character. Even the pair of bully-boys, when not physically beating Ji-hum and abusing him for not knowing English, fight with each other over the money they’ve stolen. Ji-hum finds that his father, an embittered war veteran wearing a leg brace from a war injury, sold the family’s pet dog to Dog-eye. The veteran claims he was never granted the medal to which he was entitled for killing three “commies” during the war. When the youth makes a zip gun to defend himself from the bullies, he fires at them only to have it back-fire and burn his eye. Ji-hum pokes a hole to watch Eun-ok undress and “play” with her puppy; and later he offers Chang-guk a chance to spy as well. When she figures out what’s going on she stabs the hole with a pencil, cutting Chang-guk’s eyelid. In one shot, the three walk together bearing their visible scars [Figure 2]. Meanwhile, government officials visit her mother and say they are ending the pension because they now believe that rather than being Missing in Action (MIA) because he heroically died defending South Korea, her husband chose to be repatriated to the North and leave all his family obligations behind.

I could go on with these plot details of abjection and violence. And stated so directly they make the film seem as if it were a naturalist tale in the vein of Zola or Frank Norris. But I understand the film as something more and something different. We might remember that Georg Lukács, the Marxist literary critic, faulted naturalism (and other forms of literary modernism—in contrast to his favored 19th century realism) for presenting only a partial and isolated view of the world; to which Brecht responded that while naturalism didn’t show solutions to the



Figure 2 The three youths walk, showing their physical scars. Left–right: Ji-hum’s eye bandaged from a misfired zipgun; Chang-guk bandaged from Eun-ok poking him with a pencil when she realizes he has been spying on her undressing; Eun-ok with her hair covering her eye occluded from a childhood accident.

pessimistic situations it presented, it did indicate how bad the situation was and that it was imperative to change it⁶ [Jameson 1977; Baxandall 1968]. In this film, although all the principal characters come to a bad outcome, often death, the film clearly points at a source for the misery: the U.S. presence and its distortion of Korean social relations, as well as the class and gender power imbalance in Korean culture. In this, it is a political criticism of power relations.

In the director's remarks on the American DVD version of *Address Unknown*, Kim Ki-duk claims that he made the film to show American audiences the effects of its colonial military presence on South Korea.

Address Unknown and *Coast Guard* are movies about the military situation in the Korean Peninsula. Given that context, especially with *Address Unknown* because Americans are not familiar with the unique relationship that Korea has developed during the past 50 years with the American soldiers who were stationed in Korea. I wanted to show . . . that there are still many American soldiers stationed in Korea and nothing much has changed in the last 50 years. When an American soldier commits a crime, Korea does not have any legal authority over American soldiers according to the SOFA [Status of Forces Agreement] treaty. I would like America and American citizens to understand that this kind of injustice exists in Korea. . . . Many American soldiers stationed in Korea who are not officers are in the worst situation. I wanted Americans to know how difficult it is to be stationed in Korea for two or three years. In *Address Unknown* the characters are hurt emotionally. I portrayed the characters that way, hoping that the audience would have a different understanding of war or military culture after seeing these movies. In *Address Unknown* there is a scene where dogs are killed. The scene can seem violent but the reality is that for a long time Koreans have used dogs as food and such killing may seem cruel, but it is just another custom. It is violent but such violence not only exists toward animals but also among men. Such violence can exist between America and Korea in a very subtle way and that scene was a metaphor to show that relationship. I hope that through such movies as *Coast Guard* and *Address Unknown* Americans can have a better understanding of Korea and that American politicians and citizens will become intermediaries to help with Korean unification. [Anonymous 2005]

This declaration is obviously intended as an introduction for Western viewers for the occasion of a DVD release with English subtitles several years after the film's initial release. But it cannot be taken as a genuine statement of the filmmaker's main intent. Much more obviously and importantly, the film serves as a social and political criticism of South Korean society. The depiction of U.S. rank-and-file soldiers stationed in Korea is a minor theme in *Address Unknown*, though their limited and frustrating situation is clearly shown. The critique of the U.S. military centers on the general situation and the power structure, not the individuals.

Given that the film is set in 1970, though made 30 years later, one might read it in terms of the Cold War, as Fred Halliday does in some remarks on the influence of the post-World War II global power structure on cultural expression [Halliday 2001: 692]. The year 1970 allows the key protagonists to be in their teens or early twenties and still shaped by the earlier moment of the active conflict and the ongoing U.S. presence. For example, Eun-ok's father is presumed MIA, while the old veterans in town gather to practice archery and relive their wartime

experiences. But the film was made and appeared at a moment of a new, more democratic and open government in South Korea with which the issue of reunification became a central public issue, to the dismay of the George W. Bush administration which scuttled the Clinton administration's disarmament deal with North Korea. Bush declared the Democratic People's Republic of Korea part of the "Axis of Evil," and refused any diplomacy for years (to the frustration of key South Korean politicians). In turn, North Korea developed nuclear weapons, producing six to eight bombs, and advanced its missile technology.⁷

The writer-director Kim Ki-duk was born in 1960 in a poor rural area, and as a youth he experienced the culture of a *gigichon* (military town). He appears a somewhat anomalous figure in South Korean cinema circles: he did not have a university education, and he did not go through formal media education or an apprenticeship within the film industry. He came to cinema late, and only after spending several years as an industrial worker, then in the marines, and then working as an artist. He traveled to France and there lived by selling his paintings and, according to his own legend, first experienced cinema. Upon return he determined to make films, beginning with writing. His first efforts are generally seen as rough, and he did not attain commercial success in Korea until his films had already been received on the international film festival circuit. While Korea has a strong and effective state apparatus to promote the film industry and validate name directors, Kim was an outsider by background and by the disturbing themes and images he used.⁸ In *The Isle* [*Seom* 2000] characters engage in self-mutilation intended for suicide, while in *Bad Guy* [*Nabbeun namja* 2001] a middle-class college girl is forced into abject prostitution and comes to bond with her pimp. With more recent films Kim gained a larger audience at home and more critical respect among some critics as a serious film artist.

GEOPOLITICS OF THE FAMILY

Korea's history as a colony of Japan began in the last quarter of the 19th century with trade, military, and finally full political control when the peninsula was annexed by Japan in 1910. After World War II the nation was divided between a Soviet-controlled north and a U.S.-controlled south, in expectation of unification. But the situation became the first direct military confrontation of the Cold War, the Korean War of 1950–1953. The stalemate that ended open hostilities, with two million Koreans dead, resulted in a large U.S. military presence in the south.⁹ This fact continues the neocolonial relation of South Korea to the United States. The Republic of Korea was governed by successive dictatorial administrations which dominated national politics. The deeply corrupt autocratic first head of state, Syngman Rhee, resigned due to massive protests in 1960. With a military coup shortly afterwards, the dictatorship of Park Chun-hee (1961–1979) rapidly expanded South Korea's export economy while repressing labor and democratic movements. In another *coup d'état*, Chun Doo-whan came to power with brutal repression (1980–1987). During the first 40 years of the ROK a militaristic anti-communism was used to quash any discussion or analysis of class discrimination as well as to repress labor and social issues organizing. In 1987, following

extensive protests, direct election was finally established, but the next administration was only marginally more democratic. Civil society became more open in the 1990s.

Culturally, the strong heritage of Confucianism in Korea presents a particular patriarchal form extending from the top of the government down to the individual family member. In this way the nation is configured with a particular set of values and attitudes that permeates society. Thus during the period of Japanese colonization Korean language and culture were actively repressed, and those who held to national liberation framed their struggle around an idealized view of the nation.¹⁰ In the postwar era, there was both a reaction against Japan, with for example, all official Japanese culture prohibited until 1999,¹¹ and an assertion of the uniqueness of Korean culture (albeit while recognizing the peninsula's political division), a claim made easier by the absence of ethnic or minority communities in Korea.¹²

For over a century then, first Japan's colonial occupation shaped Korea, followed by a fierce Cold-War-framed hot civil war, which established a military neo-colonial presence by the United States. This legacy of traumatic violence, at times open and at other times opaque, shapes the reality and ideology of familial social relations. Most notoriously, during World War II the Japanese military forced Korean women to become sexual slaves for the troops throughout their empire.¹³ Under U.S. neo-imperialism, this gender violence continued in a different way. The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the United States and South Korea removes all U.S. military personnel from the local civil and criminal justice system. Fundamentally, there is little or no justice for local people when they are wronged by American soldiers.

PROSTITUTION

Address Unknown represents prostitution in relation to two figures. Chang-guk's mother might have been a sex worker, but that was in an earlier era: the 1950s in the film's internal scheme. The other is Eun-ok, the schoolgirl who represents a more contemporary example of relations with the U.S. forces. In both cases, the relation is shown through different but interwoven frames: economic, political, gendered, and violent. The film's presentation of the situation shows the devastating effect on individuals, on their psychology and on the social fabric of the community. Significantly, Kim Ki-duk presents this material but does not judge the female characters adversely for the decisions they have made; rather, he seeks to understand them. The indictment is of Korean society which allows and perpetuates this situation.

The double frame of 1970/2001 operates with the situation of Chang-guk's mother. First, it is important to recognize that throughout the film she is never identified by her own name but only in her social role, "Chang-guk's mother." Since the young man seems to be at least in his late teens, we conclude that he was born in the 1950s, the early years of the U.S. military presence. The film never states explicitly her relation to the GI who fathered the child, and this seems like a deliberate ambiguity on the director's part, for it removes the

precision of original identification (prostitute, girlfriend, etc.) and places emphasis on the resulting situation of a stigmatized single mother. She is referred to as *yanggongju*:

Historically, the term “Yanggongju” has referred to Korean women who engage in sexual labor for foreign soldiers. We need to problematize the social construction of this term, which does not refer to women working with or for Korean men. Used derogatorily, it means “Yankee whore,” “Yankee wife,” “UN Lady,” and/or “Western princess.” This epithet, “Yanggonju,” relegates Korean women working in militarized prostitution with foreign men to the lowest status within the hierarchy of prostitution. Since the end of the Korean War this category has been extended to include Korean women who marry American servicemen (pejoratively called “GI Brides”). In postwar Korea, the epithet “Yanggongju” has become synonymous with “GI Brides,” so that Korean women in interracial marriages are also viewed as “Yanggongju.” [Kim, Hyun Sook 1998: 178]

We assume that Chung-guk’s mother was either (or perhaps both) a sex worker (a term encompassing prostitutes, bar-girl hostesses, entertainers, etc.) or a girlfriend to an American GI. In such a situation a Korean woman could continue as a sex worker until unmarketable, or marry and leave Korea when her husband’s tour ended. Or she could be abandoned, as this woman is. She writes letters trying to connect with her son’s father, but they have been unanswered for two decades. She takes Polaroid photos of Chang-guk to enclose with the letters, to no avail. Her illusory hopes antagonize local residents and are stonewalled by the guards at the military base.

The 1970 frame is significant for understanding Chang-guk’s mother. She is set in the early period of military prostitution when, according to the detailed analysis of Katharine H. S. Moon, military sex workers were socially stigmatized by Korean society for being in violation of Confucian patriarchal expectations of female chastity. In a society where Korean men had been disempowered by the Japanese colonizers and then by the U.S. neocolonial presence, women in contact with U.S. men were often considered “traitors.” Yet simultaneously in the postwar era they were understood by many people (especially their neighbors) to be single poor women of the lowest class who were driven by economic necessity into prostitution. They were also widely considered to be “unruly” and “wild”—forced to fend for themselves and their families and aggressive in so doing. In fact local authorities had little control over them, while local communities in particular (as well as the nation as a whole) needed the foreign capital they brought home with their bodies and labor. With 60,000 U.S. troops present, military town bars and clubs, small shops, and women produced a considerable U.S. dollar revenue. While the U.S. armed forces command was frustrated by the high venereal disease rate in the camp towns and racial discrimination toward African-American servicemen, it had reduced leverage due to another condition. During the second half of the 1960s, the ROK sent 50,000 troops to South Vietnam, the largest contingent there after the U.S. forces. In Korea the locals allowed a fairly unconstrained culture. But with the Nixon Doctrine, which not only drew down U.S. troops in Vietnam but also reduced U.S. troop commitments in East Asia, Korea lost its bargaining advantage and feared major loss of its foreign revenue from GIs.

Using fixed rate lists and boycotts, rank-and-file U.S. servicemen began to demand lower prices in shops, clubs and prostitution. The camp town communities resisted, led by the sex workers. The resolution was a "Purification Campaign" in which the ROK took on the responsibility for aggressively administering sexual hygiene and "re-educated" the *yanggonju*, defining them officially as "patriots" and "personal ambassadors" to the U.S. personnel.

In *Address Unknown*, Kim represents women's sexuality as a way of addressing the political issues he wants to deal with, always linking it to a distressing violence. Theme and topic are dealt with using the fundamentally misogynist force of sexual and physical violence. Thus violent misogyny is *represented* in the film as part of a socio-political critique; but that representation is not *per se* misogynist. The film presents competing levels of injustice. The women are directly dependent on men (in the case of Chung-guk's mother to the illusory memory and fantasy future of the young man's U.S. father).

VICTIMIZATION

Chang-guk is also abandoned, but resents the fact and, although his mother taught him English, refuses to use it. Complicating this situation, he is not only of mixed nationality and race but also especially visually noticeable as the child of an African-American man and a Korean woman. Concomitant with the assertion of Korean nationalism, there is a racial valuation. Thus Chang-guk is multiply excluded from his local culture: as mixed nationality, mixed race, child of a *yanggonju*, and apprenticed to a dog-butcher (historically in Korea, butchers were of the lowest caste and had to live at the edge of town). Dog-eye has a motorcycle with a metal cage on the back to round up dogs; on the outbound trip Chang-guk gets to ride in the cage, actually occupying the dog's space.

The North American DVD release of *Address Unknown* contains the prefatory advisory, "No animal was harmed in any way during the making of this film." This obligatory disclaimer is probably true—the depicted animal violence is cleverly arranged through editing which never shows full real-time violence to the slaughtered dogs (though a chicken reappears decapitated when Ji-hun's father tries out a handgun). But the enacted violence is continuously present. For example, we first meet Eu-nok as she kicks one of the teddy bears her mother has been sewing: violence against what is conventionally "cute" and "sweet." Her pet puppy is stolen by the bully-boys who try to sell it to the restaurant, but the owner says there's not enough meat on it. They then try to kill the animal by burning it in a box, but it is rescued by Ji-hun. Ji-hun's father sells the family dog to Dog-eye but, ordered to string it up, Chang-guk protests it is his friend's pet and lets the animal slip free. It runs off, but Dog-eye unleashes his archery skill to land an arrow in the beast, who then continues pathetically to limp off with the weapon protruding, dying back at Ji-hun's house. The boy then buries the dog in a field to hide it from father and Dog-eye.

Eun-ok's emerging sexuality is first seen with her puppy. Later, Eun-ok observes a pair of forlorn dogs coupled but stuck rear to rear. The bully-boys buy a copy of *Hustler*, an explicit pornography magazine, from a GI at the

military base, and look at the pictures with a Korean/English dictionary to translate the captions. Later they give the magazine to Ji-hun, the young artist, while mugging him and stealing his wages. He shows the magazine to Eun-ok and, stimulated, they have intercourse, which is then discovered by the bullies, who beat up Ji-hun while taking turns raping Eun-ok. When it turns out she is pregnant, her mother forcibly drags her to a doctor's office for an abortion. She is kicked out of school. James, the U.S. soldier who is interested in her, begins by offering her an ice-cream, but makes her his accomplice when the military police come around by putting illegal drugs in her bag. She tries them and returns home in a disoriented daze. He gives her a ride on a bicycle, but Dog-eye comes up and yells at her that she doesn't want to turn out like Chang-guk's mother. Later the GI pushes himself on her sexually, saying "If I help you, will you be my sweetheart?" On the way home from the successful eye operation, he pulls the car into a field and they have *quid pro quo* sex. But he also feels free to slap her and, still later, jealous, tries to carve his name on her torso. (Chang-guk's mother bears such a branded tattoo on her breast from her GI lover.) Eun-ok resists the American, and chooses to stab her eye, returning to blindness and disfigurement. The film thus enacts a continuous round of pecking-order violence as almost everyone verbally abuses and physically assaults others.

The cultural intersection with America is also bound up in Eun-ok's situation. Initially she wears her hair to hide her blind eye. Early on Ji-hun gives her a portrait of her with both eyes revealed and normal: she angrily tears it up, throws it on the ground, and slaps his face. After a government worker who pays out the family's veteran pension tells the mother that the U.S. military hospital could fix the eye, Eun-ok picks up her English language textbook and begins studying it. She observes the GI playing basketball, and he sees her. When they meet he uses simple English language with her, matching her limited facility. He tears an eye from a U.S. magazine ad of a white model's face and places it over her occluded eye, giving her a Western standard of beauty [Figure 3]. The *quid pro quo* for the eye operation is clear in advance. So she does prostitute herself, trading sexual access to her body for a material benefit, health care. In turn her brother, hearing his sister having sex with the GI, slaps her puppy, and then when the girl appears says, "Give me some money, you whore."

The social critique of Korean society is refracted back through these events. The film implicitly raises the question of why Korean health care hasn't helped the girl to begin with. And clearly, there is no justice for the violent rape victim, despite the fact of a witness, Ji-hun. How do we judge a society in which a rape victim does not feel she can go to the law for justice? And one which expels a girl from school when she becomes pregnant, even after she aborts? (I must note here that the situation was not much different for many women in the United States in 1970, and it was only through feminist organizing that laws, procedures and attitudes changed.) When Eun-ok is denied schooling, her brother says that she could go work in a new factory which is making underwear for Americans, underlining the economic neocolonialism. Her mother does piecework as sweated labor; Eun-ok's future is a textile factory. She finally enacts the only agency open to her: stabbing herself blind again to stop a man from trying to carve his name on her flesh.



Figure 3 GI James gives Eun-ok an “eye” from a U.S. magazine to cover her blind one, as an indication of how she would look if the base hospital operates on her. “If I help you, will you be my sweetheart?”

VIOLENT ENDINGS

Chang-guk and his mother are stigmatized and ostracized by class and racist nationalist notions. Korean society took over the racial segregationist frame still operating among the U.S. forces during the Korean War, which resulted in the most prejudice being attached to women who consorted with African-American men, and any resulting children being doubly stigmatized.¹⁴

Chang-guk’s repressed anger erupts at several key points in the plot. He physically attacks the bullies who are harassing and shaking down Ji-hun, actually threatening them in English—of which he has a greater mastery: “Dicks like you who are so English hungry, that’ll go abroad and come back to sell-off our country!” He tries to cut off his mother’s left breast, which bears the tattooed name of his father, failing the first time and accomplishing it the second time. He shoots Dog-eye in the leg and then strings his boss up to die by hanging, and finally he dies on the motorcycle.

Political and economic oppression produces humiliation and frustration. Repressed anger leads to enacted violence, explosively erupting into the narrative. The film comes to its end with sequential violence. Significantly it is serialized rather than building—Hollywood style—to an intense crescendo. This allows each event to exist in a more analytic frame, calling on the audience to reflect on separate episodes.

Consider this cascade of violence. After Chang-guk’s mother steals some cabbages and gets into a fight with the farmers, Chang-guk carries her home and punches her face and body. He grabs a knife and intends to cut her breast which has the tattooed name of his American GI father, but she evades him and Ji-hun intervenes. Dog-eye arrives and then chases Chung-guk and beats

him. But the tables turn when Dog-eye is trying to shoot a canine and Chung-guk grabs the pistol, shoots Dog-eye in the leg and carts him back on the motorcycle to the butcher's dog pen. Here Chang-guk strings up the butcher, using the dogs to pull the hangman's rope. Chang-guk returns to the bus, heats water for a bath, and then bathes his mother, stopping suddenly and cutting his mother's breast. He then rides off on the motorcycle and dies by driving off the road, landing headfirst in a rice paddy, stuck up to his waist in the mud. Once again, exact character psychology is suspended: he is clearly agitated, but if his death is the result of uncontrolled anger or of deliberate suicide is left undetermined.¹⁵ Thus we are left to consider the broader situation rather than individual motivation. His mother, told by the police that her son killed Dog-eye, hysterically searches the countryside, as does Ji-hun. The bullies rough up the boy yet again, then fight each other over the money they stole until police intervene and put one in jail. Ji-hun then shoots an arrow at James while he is in Eun-ok's room, but misses; the GI slaps her, yelling, "What's he to you?"

Early on a snowy morning Chang-guk's mother finds her son frozen, and must start a fire to soften the frozen ground to pull the body out [Figure 4]. James, the GI, cracks up during maneuvers and goes AWOL; we know he will end up in military prison. At Eun-ok's he drinks, and tries to carve his name on her torso. She hits him and he starts to strangle her. She takes a knife and he blurts out, "Go ahead, kill me, I love you!" But instead she disfigures her eye. He comes outside to face the local veterans, bows in hand, and Ji-hun shoots an arrow into the soldier's groin. Ji-hun then goes off and puts an arrow in the back of the still free bully-boy.

After his rampage, Ji-hun turns himself in for shooting the GI (which is what the police are upset about, not the other crimes and violence), and he is put in the same cell as the bully. The boy has ingested some wire wound into a ball, and



Figure 4 Chang-guk's mother finds her son's body where he fell headfirst into a rice paddy, and is now frozen, between earth and sky. Ji-hun observes, as she starts a fire to defrost the earth.

defecates it in the middle of the night, then unravels it to choke the bully. While he is being transferred, he sees Chung-guk's mother has set fire to the bus, killing herself and cremating her son's body. Ji-hun tries to choke the cop driver to make him stop; the cop grabs his gun and shoots Ji-hun in the kneecap, reproducing the same leg injury as the boy's father. In an ironic coda, while Chang-guk's mother prepared to immolate herself with her son's remains, a final letter arrives, but she ignores it and it blows away. Later, on maneuvers, a GI finds it, opens and begins to read it. Her letter is answered, still not by the father but another American: "Dear Chang-guk's mother, How are you? My name is Clint and I own a small deli in California. Are you . . ." [fade out to indistinct, music up]. What should we make of this? Has she begun to write to a "mail order bride" service? But the salutation is strange—she doesn't have her own name or identity, just "Chang-guk's mother." Has she been writing to try to get not herself but her son relocated to the United States? We don't know, but the film ends by opening up another door, a lost chance.

In this world, everything is brutalized. When Eun-ok's brother learns his father repatriated himself to North Korea, he exclaims, "He's alive!" But his mother, with her pension ended, says, "What use is that?" Ji-hun falls through a hollow space near his home; it's discovered the remains of a North Korean officer were buried there. They are unceremoniously excavated, with Ji-hun's father remarking, "They say rotting corpses improve the taste of water," and he always thought his well was especially sweet. More attention is given to recovering the officer's side-arm pistol than the bones, which will be reburied beside the river. Only Ji-hun pays attention to the wallet of the corpse, which contains a photo of the soldier with his wife and child: another father, lost to a family north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Understanding the full resonance of the film depends on understanding some essentials of Korean society that are articulated in the difference between the film's internal timeline of 1970 and its actual making in 2001. This is dramatized by the dispersed script. *Address Unknown* has an implicit structure that reveals social relations. It presents a narrative architecture that includes political history.

While Confucianism has a powerful ideological presence in Korean culture, enforcing a strictly patterned patriarchal and patrilineal system of social organization, in this film we have an upside-down version. The ideal Confucian social organization places the wise ruler at the top, governing successive layers which reproduce the same pattern down to the family, with the father governing and women and children subordinate. But in *Address Unknown*, the fathers are cruel, ignorant, and absent or abject. Order is replaced with a constant recycling of violence. Women have to fend for themselves in a world of limited economic possibilities.

Eun-ok's father was Missing in Action and then discovered to have gone to the North. Chang-guk's father abandoned him and his mother by returning to the United States, Ji-hun's father bitterly complains he never got the medal he deserved. Dog-eye doesn't have children but is a surrogate father for Chang-guk; he enacts that through violence and abuse of the young man. Eun-ok's mother lives on a widow's pension until the truth about her husband comes out. She ekes out a small income from the piece-work sewing of teddy bears as

sweated labor. Eun-ok initially is a student, but is kicked out of school when she becomes pregnant after being raped. She then forms a *quid pro quo* relationship with a young GI, but that too ends. Chang-guk's mother has no one to protect her and ends her life with self-immolation after her son's death. Her social role has ended; she ends her life.¹⁶

In his body of work and in interviews, Kim Ki-duk articulates the injustice he sees at the heart of Korean culture past and present. In addition to depicting militarism and violence as structural defects, he sees class oppression as a foundational cause of social disorder. The nation's past trauma of colonialism, civil war and neocolonialism is worked out in explicit violence and victimization. But it is also internalized in a particularly Korean psychological state: *han*. *Han* refers to sorrow, suffering and an unresolved resentment. In an interview Kim identifies it as a particularly Korean malady which holds back both people and the nation: "...a Korean feeling of deep sadness that cannot be forgotten..." [Jung 2002].

Kim Ki-duk does use and represent violence: physical, verbal, economic, political, institutional and social. And in this film and many of his others, it is relentless. But it is clearly directed at a critique of the power structure, and at the internalized ideology of the people who live within it. He doesn't offer a solution, but he clearly presents an intolerable situation, one that must change. And, it seems, in a society so structured by violence enforcing power relations, violence will be part of making any fundamental change. The dogs may get their day, the one in which they can hang their butcher.

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NOTES

1. Kim provides an extensive discussion of race and gender issues in the Korean context, while Choe's analysis tends to concern ethical issues. Choe provides an admirable close reading of a key scene between the dog butcher and his assistant.
2. Rayns is the most negative critic: he seems especially annoyed that Western critics and programmers like Kim Ki-duk rather than the Korean directors who Rayns favors. The Korean feminist criticism is frequently mentioned, but unspecified. I have found mention of an annual "awards" for misogyny in film, but this seems to be largely a pressure group publicity matter. I have not found any substantive feminist analysis, but I do not read Korean so it may exist though not accessible to me. Jung [2003] has edited a collection of essays on Kim that has not been translated.
3. In *Address Unknown*, the neophyte U.S. actor Mitch Malum plays the American soldier/boyfriend. Many reviewers note his deficient performance, which probably stems from his limited talent compounded with being directed in a foreign-language film. Posting on fan blogs point out that he is supposed to be in the U.S. Army but at times wears a U.S. Air Force jacket, etc.
4. A zip gun is a crude improvised weapon that can shoot a single bullet.

5. Dog meat is available in much of East Asia, including China and the Philippines. At times such as the Seoul Olympics in 1988 it has been made an issue by animal welfare activists in the West. The mention of killing dogs for food is unexceptional in East Asian cinema that isn't expected to circulate theatrically in the West. For example, Mabel Cheung's *Beijing Rocks* [2001, Hong Kong] milks it for melodramatic pathos. But you'd never find it included in a Jackie Chan or a Jet Li film. The Philippine film *Azucena* [director Carlos Siquior-Rena, 2000] portrays an unlikely friendship between a vendor of dogmeat as food and a girl who loves dogs as pets.
6. Jameson collects the key texts. Brecht's most direct statement on naturalism is quoted in Baxandall [1968], which provides a useful historical context.
7. *Address Unknown* can be logically paired with Kim's *The Coast Guard* [*Hae Anseon*, 2002] as two films about the issue of Korean unification and the psychological cost of maintaining a military consciousness and presence. *The Coast Guard* depicts a young soldier (male military service is mandatory in South Korea, which has the sixth largest armed forces in the world) who is stationed at a small outpost to block possible spies from North Korea. While his peers are draftees passing time until discharge, he has internalized the mission and, trigger happy, mistakenly kills a civilian. He becomes increasingly crazed in the aftermath, and is discharged for his behavior but still returns to the post. Spiraling violence ensues, and his squad begins shooting each other while the chain of command passes down ever harsher physical punishment on everyone. Anticommunism, militarism, and enacted violence are portrayed as structural causes for personal and social disintegration.
8. The Korean Film Council (KOFIC) has published an authoritative history of South Korean cinema, and produces a quarterly magazine for overseas consumption, an annual catalog of films and a bi-annual database reference book on the industry: www.kofic.or.kr. It has published ten monographs in English and Korean on contemporary directors; Kim Ki-duk is not one of them. Yet the Council reports that, of all the requests from abroad for assistance in programming festival and retrospective screenings of Korean films, over half are for Kim Ki-duk films. Kim's statements in interviews that he is stigmatized by the establishment seem borne out by facts.
9. The large number of troops (60,000) was intended to warn North Korea that any attack below the DMZ would be considered an attack on the United States and produce a full military response. The stalemate produced the world's most heavily fortified area, with massive minefields to inhibit any ground advance and North Korean artillery and missiles in place able to target Seoul. Today the U.S. forces number about 28,000, after many were withdrawn to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2000, the figure was closer to 40,000.
10. The Japanese essentially tried to make Koreans into Japanese by annexing the land, prohibiting the national language in schools and public life, removing and destroying Korean art and culture, etc. In contrast, the Japanese treated Taiwan (occupied 1874–1945) as a traditional colony and accepted both the native Taiwanese cultures and the Chinese presence, seeking only economic exploitation of the island.
11. Though in a clever global capitalist turn, Japanese mass culture such as *anime*, *manga*, and Hello Kitty circulated translated into Korean language, without acknowledgement of their national origins.
12. In fact this has broken down, though the mythology remains dominant. About 2 percent of the population of 49 million consists of legal and illegal immigrants, mostly from East and Southeast Asia. An in-migration to the cities, particularly of rural women seeking work in global capitalist factories, created a rural labor (and wife) shortage which results in active recruiting of ethnic female Koreans from mainland China, and Vietnamese and Cambodian rural women. Eastern Europe is another

- recruiting area. Moving abroad, the Korean skilled labor force has been attracted to Canada and the United States (especially southern California), while the unskilled labor force finds work, and rampant discrimination, in Japan.
13. Euphemistically called "comfort women"; about 200,000 victims (including some Chinese) were forced into this activity. Five million Korean men served as labor conscripts, and tens of thousands were drafted into imperial military service.
 14. Following World War II the U.S. armed forces were officially desegregated; however *de facto* racism continued long after in practice. Some Korean sex workers duplicated this and refused commerce with African-American GIs. With continuing tensions, fights, and sometimes race riots through the 1950s and 60s within the U.S. military around the world (echoing the domestic urban rebellions), the U.S. forces command sought the assistance of the Korean state in ending local marketplace discrimination, including the sexual market. This is discussed extensively in Myung Ja Kim's essay on the film [2007]; she cites an essay by Hyung-Sook Kim for details [1998]. In addition to the women, their children were stigmatized. Over 160,000 orphans, almost all from Korean mothers and U.S. fathers, have been adopted out of the country, two-thirds to the United States. In almost all cases they were adopted by small-town and suburban white parents who usually had no particular connection to Korean or Asian culture. Within Korea some observers have argued that the successive Korean governments used out-of-country adoption as a social policy to avoid dealing with the realities of social prejudice. African-American-fathered orphans were the least likely to be adopted and the most stigmatized in Korean communities.
 15. In an interview Kim discusses how the film's characters resemble his youthful self and his friends; the African-American/Korean fellow committed suicide. In the film it is clear Chang-guk drives off in great distress and agitation, but it is not specified that he intends to kill himself [Kim n.d.].
 16. Chang-guk's mother takes the body back to her bus. She is seen in apparent shock and chewing. Myung Ja Kim [2007] interprets this scene as representing the mother devouring, eating, her son's body; but I find this interpretation unsupported within the film text. I have not been able to contact her to ask for further explanation.

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